

Cabeza de Vaca

Excerpt from: Rebecca Solnit. "A Field Guide to Getting Lost." (2005)

The Blue of Distance

In 1527 the Spaniard Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca refused his commander's orders to take the ships of their expedition to a safe port while the commander and most of the men marched inland to explore. Narváez, the commander, asked why, and Cabeza de Vaca, the expedition's second in command, answered "that I felt certain he would never find the ships again, or they him, as anyone could predict from the woefully inadequate preparation; that I would rather hazard the danger that lay ahead in the interior than give any occasion for questioning my honor by remaining safely aboard." So the incompetent Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca, and three hundred men traveled north for fifteen days among the dwarf fan palms of an uninhabited expanse of what Juan Ponce de León had named Florida fourteen years before. They had met natives who told them that to the north was "a province called Apalachen, where was much gold and plenty of everything we wanted." Honor and greed would be the two gates through which Cabeza de Vaca entered the realm of the utter unknown.

The Apalachen they found was a village of forty thatched houses with ripe corn in the fields, dry corn in storage, deerskins, and "small, poor quality shawls" as all its treasure. The gold seekers marched onward, wading through lakes, tramping for days, skirmishing with natives, eating their horses, building barges to head toward Mexico and the Spanish settlements there, not knowing how far away they were, dying of armor-piercing arrows, of disease, of hunger, of drowning. No one will ever be lost like those early conquistadors again, wandering a continent about which they knew nothing, not its topography, its climate, encountering inhabitants with whom there was no common language, plunging into a place for which they had no words for places, for plants, for the animals—skunks, alligators, bison—so unlike those of their own continent.

Eduardo Galeano notes that America was conquered, but not discovered, that the men who arrived with a religion to impose and dreams of gold never really knew where they were, and that this discovery is still taking place in our time. This suggests that most European-Americans remained

lost over the centuries, lost not in practical terms but in the more profound sense of apprehending where they truly were, of caring what the history of the place was and its nature. Instead, they named it after the places they had left and tried to reconstruct those places through imported plants, animals, and practices, though pumpkin, maple, and other staples would enter their diet as words like Connecticut and Dakota and raccoon would enter their vocabularies. But Cabeza de Vaca and his companions would be conquered by this land and its people, and he at least seems to have found out where he was. All but four of the six hundred men who set out on the expedition died in this place they did not know, either quickly, of violence, illness, or hunger, or slowly, as slaves or adopted members of tribes, and their stories are mostly lost to history.

At the Mississippi Delta, Narváez put the strongest and healthiest men on his barge and rowed ahead, abandoning the two other barges. Days passed. One barge was lost in a storm. Cabeza de Vaca commanded the other, whose men had all

“fallen over on one another, close to death. Few were any longer conscious. Not five could stand. When night fell, only the navigator and I remained able to tend the barge. Two hours after dark, he told me I must take over; he believed he was going to die that night.”

After midnight, Cabeza de Vaca recalls, “I would have welcomed death rather than see so many around me in such a condition.” At dawn, he heard breakers; at daylight, they found the land that was probably Galveston Island in Texas; and the men “began to recover their senses, their locomotion, and their hope.” Natives fed them fish and roots; they embarked again but the barge capsized near shore; and “the survivors escaped as naked as they were born, with the loss of everything we had.”

They fell upon the mercy of the natives again. Winter had come, the Spaniards commenced to starve, the natives began to die of the dysentery that came with them, and the sixteen survivors of the ninety or so shipwrecked named the place the Island of Doom.

Cabeza de Vaca became a slave to this tribe, leading an “unbearable” life of hard work, including digging roots out of water and out of canebrakes. He

was pared back to nothing, no language, no clothes, no weapons, no power, but he escaped and established a career as a trader of seashells, red ocher, and mesquite beans in the region. He seems to have had remarkable physical stamina and an ability to reinvent himself again and again. He walked for days and weeks on one austere meal a day. He became a slave again. He met up with some fellow survivors and with them escaped this new captivity. They arrived in the territory of another indigenous nation where they were welcomed as healers and stayed until spring. And what is remarkable about this point in his narrative is that he reports that he got lost looking for mesquite bean pods. He had so adapted to this new life he had fallen into, that he no longer considered himself lost until he lost track of the route and his companions in the pathless region of the mesquites. He traveled for five days, carrying burning brands so he could keep himself warm with fires at night, and on the fifth he caught up with his fellow survivors from the Narváez expedition and with the Indians, who fed him prickly pears.

Because they went naked in the scorching sun, he reports, he and his companions “shed our skins twice a year like snakes” and suffered sores from sun, wind, and chafing labor (though one of them, Estevanico or Esteban, “the negro,” was from Africa and must have fared better when it came to burning). And again “we became physicians, of whom I was the boldest and most venturesome in trying to cure anything. Confidence in our ministrations as infallible extended to a belief that none could die while we were among them.”

Months passed among various tribes, years had passed since the disasters in Florida. They continued to travel west. Somewhere along the way they seem to have become sacred beings, these naked, relentless survivors whose journey had become a triumphal procession accompanied by three or four thousand locals. Each new village greeted them as miracle workers, holding dances in their honor. They received copper rattles, coral beads, turquoises, five green arrowheads whose malachite Cabeza de Vaca took for emerald, and an offering of six hundred deer hearts. They had been wandering for nine years by the time they arrived in what he called the Village of Hearts.

Soon after, they found evidence and heard news of conquistadors: they had arrived in what is now New Mexico, a “vast territory, which we found vacant, the inhabitants having fled to the mountains in fear of Christians.” Assuring the natives that they were going to “order them to stop killing, enslaving, and dispossessing the Indians,” Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions pressed on. In the report he would write afterward, Cabeza de Vaca advised that only kindness would win these people to Spanish subjection and to Christianity. One day he set out with his black-skinned companion and eleven natives, walking more than thirty miles. The following morning they caught up with slave-hunting Spaniards on horseback, who were stunned by this naked figure at ease among the people and places of this other continent. Although he had been striving for nearly a decade to return to his own people, the initial meeting was not easy. The Spaniards they met wanted to enslave Cabeza de Vaca’s entourage, and he and his fellow survivors “became so angry that we went off forgetting the many Turkish-shaped bows, the many pouches, and the five emerald arrowheads, etc., which we thus lost.”

The Indians among whom they retreated refused to believe they were of the same tribe as the conquistadors, because “we came from the sunrise; they from the sunset; we healed the sick, they killed the sound; we came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced; we coveted nothing but gave whatever we were given, while they robbed whomever they found and bestowed nothing on anyone.”

These men who came from the sunset were what he had been when he landed in Florida.

It took some time after he arrived in a Spanish town in Mexico before he could stand to wear clothes or sleep anywhere but on the floor. He had gone about naked, shed his skin like a snake, had lost his greed, his fear, been stripped of almost everything a human being could lose and live, but he had learned several languages, he had become a healer, he had come to admire and identify with the Native nations among whom he lived; he was not who he had been.

The language of his report to the king is terse, impersonal; his declarative

sentences describe only the tangibles of places, foods, encounters, and even these are given in the starkest terms, with little description, little detail. The terms in which to describe the extraordinary metamorphosis of his soul did not exist, at least for him. He was among the first, and the first to come back and tell the tale, of Europeans lost in the Americas, and like many of them he ceased to be lost not by returning but by turning into something else.

Cabeza de Vaca and his companions plunged into the American landscape, but in the centuries afterward many entered it involuntarily, as captives. Some of those who returned wrote or dictated accounts of their experiences, and these became a distinctly American genre of literature, the captivity narrative. Of course the stories of those who did not return remained unrecorded; their journeys were out of writing, out of English, into another terrain of story.

Often, initially, these strays and captives felt that they were far from home, distant from their desires, and then at some point, in a stunning reversal, they came to be at home and what they had longed for became remote, alien, unwanted. For some, perhaps there was a moment when they realized that the old longings had become little more than habit and that they were not yearning to go home but had been home for some time; for others the dreams of home must have faded by stages among the increasingly familiar details of their surroundings. They must have learned their surroundings like a language and one day woken up fluent in them. Somehow, for these castaways the far became near and the near far. They did not reject the unfamiliar but embraced it, in the course of which it became familiar. By the end of his decade of wandering, Cabeza de Vaca was no longer in harmony with his own culture, but he had kept it as a destination, a goal, that kept him purposeful and moving, even though arrival was another trauma. Many others refused to return.

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